

U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT
16 March 1987

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CAN REAGAN WRITE THE SCRIPT?

In the Hollywood movies familiar to the President, there is a decisive moment when the hero faces his adversaries, turns the tide in his favor and lives happily ever after with the heroine. At the first face-off, when the Iran affair broke, the President tried defiance and got himself into deeper trouble; at the second, distancing himself, he provoked anger; at the third, pleading amnesia, he lost respect. His speech to the nation can at last turn the tide. Whether he lives happily ever after depends on what he does from here on.

One sees the deftness of Howard Baker in Reagan's new attitude as much as one saw the clumsiness of the departed Donald Regan in the earlier responses. What is new and good is not so much the President's admission of error in implementing the Iran policy, nor his purge of the National Security Council staff nor his adoption of the criticisms and program of the Tower Commission. The essential problem has not been with the NSC staff but with the President. McFarlane, Poindexter and North were doing the things the President wanted even if Reagan did not direct them in so many words. No, the real hope in the speech lies in its shedding of the dogma that the White House always knows what is best or, as Mr. Dooley once said, that it is doing "what he thinks th' Lord wud do if He only knew th' facts of th' case."

In particular, the President vowed: "Proper procedures for consultations with the Congress will be followed, not only in letter but in spirit." The reference was to the apparent defiance of the will of Congress concerning arms for the Contras. The pledge was welcomed by congressional leaders. But Reagan's commitment to consult Congress will have to go further and include his domestic programs.

A proper partnership gives America hope for the next two years. Reagan's first six years restored our national self-respect and self-confidence—so long unfashionable to those who constantly see only what is wrong with America. He gave us a vision of a country imbued with optimism, patriotism, confidence and individual opportunity. Many of the President's policies worked. Inflation has fallen away, millions of new jobs have been

created and the national defense has been rebuilt.

But the strain of stubbornness and dogma has left us with an exploding national debt that threatens our future. Just as in the Iran affair, the President tried to distance himself from the consequences of spending more but raising less revenue. Congress, for all its faults, has been more open-minded. It has been willing to consider tax increases and spending cuts as part of a compromise with the President. A fiscal policy to reduce the deficit is the first requirement for White House and Capitol Hill cooperation.

At the same time, the Democrats will have to keep their heads and recognize the President's role in foreign affairs. Reagan was wrong to turn the NSC staff into an operative agency, but Congress must be careful of how it intrudes into foreign-policy areas that are, after all, the constitutional responsibility of the President. Any hobbling of presidential discretion in covert operations would be disastrous when we must deal with hostile regimes where diplomacy is often useless. The world is hardly a tidy, peaceful place where adversaries settle disputes according to the rules.



The proviso must be the one the President stated himself—that if Americans were to see the covert operation on the front pages of their newspapers, they would say, "That makes sense." Congress is entitled to satisfy itself on that score, and the President is entitled to ask that Congress deal with the leaks and risks endemic when too many people are privy to covert operations. Having two intelligence committees with large staffs in Congress is unnecessary and dangerous. Congress should work with the President and the new CIA director to develop a single intelligence-oversight committee with a small professional staff—similar, as the Tower Commission pointed out, to the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy that existed until the mid-'70s. Only in this way can we fight the dirty, undeclared but unrelenting war with those hostile to our way of life.

There can be a happy ending. But the President and Congress will have to collaborate on the script. ■